

**Testimony Submitted to the
Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies
of the
U.S. House of Representatives
by
Capt. Mike Jennings, For-Hire Recreational Fisherman and
Owner of Cowboy Charters, Freeport, TX
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My name is Mike Jennings and I appreciate the opportunity to testify today in support of the \$54 million in funding for the National Catch Share Program in Fiscal Year 2012, and to express my opposition to any provision that would strip fishermen of the ability to decide for ourselves what types of programs are best suited to manage the fisheries in which we participate.

I have been a licensed charter boat captain fishing the Gulf of Mexico off Texas for over 25 years. I grew up fishing Texas's inshore and offshore waters and I am proud to make a living by taking my clients fishing and giving them access to the fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, the for-hire industry in the Gulf of Mexico provides access to millions of fishermen every year.

As you know, several species of fish that are critical to the recreational fishing industry in the Gulf have become depleted and are subject to increasingly restrictive management measures. Fishing seasons have gotten shorter, size limits for the fish we can keep have gotten longer, and bag limits have gotten smaller. These factors make it very difficult for charter boat operators like me to stay in business. The service we provide to our clients is access to ocean fisheries, but in recent years government regulations have prevented us from providing this access. Either the seasons are closed, in which case going fishing is not even an option, or the size and bag limits are so restrictive that clients cannot justify the expense of going fishing. These increasingly stringent measures are blocking public access to fishery resources, and in the process hurting our businesses and local economies.

Fortunately, there is a solution that can simultaneously provide increased access to fishery resources while also providing for the long-term conservation of those resources. That solution is catch share programs. Under a catch share program, the amount of fish available to be caught is divvied up among the participants in that fishery, who can then decide when, where and how best to make use of their harvesting privileges. The participants also have a long-term stake in the fishery, the value of which increases as the fishery becomes more healthy and productive.

We have seen how effective catch share programs can be for the commercial sector in reducing bycatch, providing reliable and timely data needed to manage fisheries, extending fishing seasons and helping fishermen lower their operating expenses. Simply put, catch share programs have enabled commercial fishermen to earn more for their fish while spending less time to catch them.. Under catch share programs, everyone wins – our fisheries are healthier, fishermen make more money, and consumers get better quality product.

Charter boat operators in the Gulf like me want to enjoy the same benefits from catch share programs that our counterparts in the commercial sector have experienced. For example, charter boat operators

could schedule their trips to coincide with tourism peaks instead of when the federal government says we can fish. We are now in the process of exploring a voluntary individual fishing quota (IFQ) pilot program for recreational fishing headboats that target red snapper. We believe that IFQ programs in the for-hire recreational sector could be the best way to achieve conservation objectives while helping all of us earn a better living. Designing an IFQ program for the for-hire fishery has its challenges, but this pilot program will help us begin to address those challenges.

I support the \$54 million in funding for the National Catch Share Program in FY12. Cutting this funding would reduce NOAA's ability to fund cooperative agreements with our state Parks and Wildlife Department. Now is the time to expand these types of programs to realize even greater benefits and to provide our fishing communities with the added flexibility that comes along with these types of programs.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the regional fishery management councils now have the option to implement a catch share program where the stakeholders in a fishery want such a program. In my region of the country – the Gulf of Mexico – any new IFQ program is subject to a referendum and must be approved by 50% of the participants in the fishery.

Unfortunately, a recent amendment passed by the House would strip the ability of fishermen to implement a catch share program, even if a majority of them voted for such a program. . It appears that some people are confusing a potential solution to the problem (catch shares), with the cause of the problem (the targeted species have been overfished). I do not understand why Congress would reduce the flexibility that exists in the law by taking one management tool away from us – especially a tool that has been proven more effective than all the others in improving the conservation and economics of our fisheries. Fishermen are already struggling from poor economic conditions – our clients simply have fewer resources to devote towards hiring people like me to take them fishing. Now we also have to contend with Congress taking away our options to manage our own fisheries. Now should be the time when Congress is giving us more tools to manage our fisheries, not less. We need all the options at our disposal.

I urge the Subcommittee to support the \$54 million for the National Catch Share Program in FY12 and to oppose any provision that would prevent the regional councils from implementing a new catch share program.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my input on these important issues.